



CRIA CUERVOS ... is a June, 2016 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that film.

18 of a possible 20 points

******1/2 of a possible *******

**Spain 1975 color 109 minutes subtitled live action feature black comedy
Elias Querejeta Producciones Cinematográficas S.L. Producers: Elias Querejeta, Carlos Saura**

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates juvenile performer**

Points:

- 2 Direction: Carlos Saura**
- 1 Editing: Pablo del Amo**
- 2 Cinematography: Teodoro Escamilla***
Still Photography: Javier López Martínez*
- 2 Lighting**
- 1 Screenplay: Carlos Saura**
Script Supervisor: Paco Lucio
- 2 Music: Federico Mompou (Canción No. 6), Imperio Argentina ("¡Hay, Maricruz!"),
José Luis Perales* ("Porque te vas" = "Because You're Leaving")**
- 2 Set Design: M. Del Marín Carmin***
Set Decoration: Rafael Palmero*
Props: Jesús Mateos*
Costume Design: Maiki Marín
Makeup: Romana González
- 2 Sound Recording: Bernardo Mens, Antonio Illán**
- 2 Acting**
- 2 Creativity**

18 total points

Cast: Ana Torrent (j)* (Ana, about age 7), Conchita Pérez (j) (Irene, Ana's older sister), Mayte Sánchez (Maite, Ana's younger sister), Geraldine Chaplin* (Maria, Ana's mother / Ana twenty years later as an adult), Mónica Randall* (Aunt Paulina), Florinda Chico* (Rosa, the maid), Héctor Alterio (Anselmo, Ana's dad), Germán Cobos (Nicolas Garontes), Mirta Miller (Amelia Garontes, wife of Nicolas and lover of Anselmo), Josefina Diaz* (Grandmother), others

CRIA CUERVOS ... (RAISE RAVENS ...) is possibly one of the five best Spanish dramas ever and the second chronologically to utilize the mysterious intensity of child actress Ana Torrent. Making her feature debut two years earlier in EL ESPIRITU DE LA COLMENA (THE SPIRIT OF THE BEEHIVE), Ana had already become a celebrity, Spain's first bona fide juvenile actress superstar. Director Carlos Saura decided the eight-year-old was just what he needed as his coolly resolute child murderess for CRIA CUERVOS ... who mistakenly believes herself to have lethally poisoned Papa as payback for adulterous mistreatment of Mama, conduct she held responsible for Maria's terminal illness and death.

The film opens with a scan of family photographs, informing viewers immediately that focus will be on a Spanish family. Shot months before dictator Francisco Franco's death, with Spain still ruled as a police state, Saura's film exudes the claustrophobic ambience of social repression. Most of the drama is set in a large house just off one of Madrid's bustling downtown streets. This residence was bequeathed by Ana's grandfather to his widow, now a mute, wheelchair-bound invalid. Its interior maintenance has been delegated to Rosa, an earthy maid fond of gossip and former caretaker of severely ill Maria, Ana's mother.

Decades before screen events begin, Maria had been feted as a promising concert pianist, possibly even a musical prodigy. At one of her performances, she met career officer Anselmo. The two fell in love and married. Maria sacrificed her prospective career to become a homemaker, eventually mothering three children.

Irene, the oldest, gravitates to bicycle riding and reading apparently lurid crime stories. Middle daughter Ana plays with dolls, assists Grandmother and Rosa, continually eavesdrops and spies on adult situations unfit for child observation. She's also chief food provider for a pet guinea pig, Roni, which turns out to be a true murder victim of hers, fatally overstuffing itself on daily offerings of lettuce leaves from the refrigerator. Youngest of the girls is beginning reader Maite, whose attachment to Irene is far stronger than any affection she might feel for Ana. In fact, throughout the film Ana is generally odd girl out.

Following introductory family snapshots is a sequence where Ana, suffering from insomnia, comes downstairs for either a late night snack or a drink of water. She overhears

lovmaking from an adjacent bedroom. Papa and Amelia, spouse of a colleague of Anselmo's, are enjoying extramarital bliss. In Anselmo's case, far too much, bringing on a heart attack. He dies amid rapture, a typical black humor touch by Saura. His lover hastily re-dresses and exits, but not before catching sight of observer Ana and vice versa. When that visitor shows up again at Papa's funeral, Ana tries to hide herself behind Grandmother. She doesn't wish another meeting with the cause of her family's marital fracturing.

Since Mama has already died, her three daughters are reunited with Grandmother and Aunt Paulina in the family home as commanded in Papa's will.

During the final stages of Maria's illness, Papa, Rosa, and Ana remained with her there, while Grandmother, Paulina, Irene, and Maite lived together, presumably at Paulina's residence. It must have been judged optimal for the healthy sister to tend Grandmother. Why Ana was left at home with her mother is never explained. Perhaps it was at Maria's own request. The two shared a very close bond which might have resulted from Ana's reluctance to leave the womb at time of birth. Rosa comments later on about the similarity between Ana's voice and that of her mother, also telling the girl some of her gestures resemble Maria's. Another common thread is passionate devotion to music, though the daughter's choice of tunes is decidedly melancholy, a reflection of the gloominess created by living with a dying parent. Her leitmotif, periodically revisited, is a pop song composed by José Luis Perales and sung by American-born Janette. Titled "Porque te vas," which translates into English as "Because You're Leaving," it tells the story of a lover's departure, something Ana appropriates as a metaphor for her mother's death.

Saura assigns musical themes to two other characters: Maria and Grandmother. Maria's piece, always played on solo piano, is Federico Mompou's "Canción No. 6," a composition dating most likely from sometime in the 1940s. Grandmother's song is Imperio Argentina's copla "¡Hay, Maricruz!," the kind of music popular in the 1930s and 1940s, a time when Grandmother would have been herself a mother. Each tune is someone's memory trigger.

Death stalks the family. Ana reiterates her mother's dying words in the grip of cancer "I want to die." For her, though, death is a reversible process. Just call upon a saint to restore life afterwards, which she does during a hide-and-seek game with Irene and Maite in which two discovered hiders are ordered to "die" and respond by simulating death as she points to each.

One afternoon, quizzing Grandma about her hopes, Ana learns the woman wants to die. Receiving confirmation through repetitive inquiry, she diligently goes off to retrieve her prized highly effective special ingredient. When Ana brings the can containing it back to her, Grandmother reads the label, then smilingly refuses that gift. Suicide by baking soda isn't what she had in mind.

The girls and their aunt clash repeatedly, Ana being most rebellious of the trio, to the extent of telling her guardian she wishes her dead. To expedite that outcome, Ana prepares a

drink of milk for the tired caretaker, adding her favorite flavoring. It fails to achieve the plotter's goal.

In the final frames, summer vacation ends and three youngsters, much to Paulina's relief, prepare to rejoin classmates at school. During breakfast, Irene regales Ana with a report of her most recent nightmare, one climaxing with kidnapers about to shoot her. This may have been suggested by one of Ana's prior adventures when she walked into the parlor with a loaded Luger Parabellum, pointing it directly at an amorously preoccupied duo of Paulina and Amelia's husband Nicolas. Nicolas persuaded the child to hand it over, only to find while trying to reassure Paulina of its harmlessness that the gun was fully loaded and ready to fire. Paulina responded by slapping Ana in the face, bringing on tears and precipitating hope of baking soda payback. In a homage to the spirit of mentor Luis Buñuel, Nicolas and Paulina then embrace tightly, the officer declaring rapturously overwhelming love for the woman. Midnight comedy in blazing afternoon heat and sunshine.

Saura intended the picture to show a new generation, represented by Ana, using weapons of the decadent, enfeebled older one to rebel against its enforced silence and acquiescence, thus restoring family and state to proper healthiness. Spain's adoption of democratic principles accompanied by reformed social policies shortly after the film's release and Franco's subsequent death (not occasioned by Ana's baking soda) showed his aspirations to be shared by Spaniards generally.

As for the technical achievements on display, acting, cinematography, lighting, sound, music, set décor, and props are all in peak form. Standout performances come from Geraldine Chaplin playing a dual role of remembered Maria and adult Ana, Ana Torrent as a kind of doll-like household terminator specializing in euthanasia, Mónica Randall as a well-intentioned aunt constantly misjudging social relationships, Hector Alterio as Ana's destructively hedonistic father, and Josefina Diaz as a relic of past better days. Acceptable acting comes from remaining cast members. Music is used to superb advantage in defining character. Props are memorable, especially the gun Ana claims for herself, Maite's prayer card for Roni's grave, and Ana's non-human companions of broom, 45 r.p.m. single, special preparation glass, girl doll, and baking soda can.

On the debit side, editing is rather slack. A screenplay which leaves doubts about just which visible episodes are dreams and which real events doesn't help any.

Nonetheless, this is an important, jarringly creative film meriting and rewarding close scrutiny. *Peanuts* cartoonist Charles Schulz referred to it as the best film about childhood he had seen.

Accompanying bonuses on Criterion's double-disc dvd set are a sixty-two minute feature documentary titled *PORTRAIT OF CARLOS SAURA* from 2004 — keying on the connections between Saura's two career constants: music and photography, a twenty-two minute interview from 2007 with Geraldine Chaplin revealing conflict between herself and Ana

Torrent (who preferred her own offscreen mother), an eight-minute trivial interview in English with adult Ana Torrent unable to recall in detail much about the film other than games the girls played together, and a three-minute evocative theatrical trailer admirably communicating film content and tone.

The Carlos Saura documentary contains graphic female nudity, so both it and the feature film itself are strictly adult fare.

Kino Ken wishes to thank Pip Starr for an article posted June 27, 2015 at <https://www.pigtailsinpaint.com> for insight into the motivations behind Ana's actions and an anecdote about the source of the drama's title. CRIA CUERVOS are beginning words of a proverb: "Cria cuervos y te sacarán los ojos." Translated, it means "Raise ravens and they will peck out your eyes."

Are the ravens in Saura's compelling work Ana and her sisters? Or adults such as Anselmo and Paulina who command silence, submission, and blindness to misbehavior?